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Alaska Guardsmen test distribution capabilities during Alaska Shield exercise

CORDOVA, Alaska — In the event of an emergency, water can become quite scarce. The community of Cordova, Alaska had an opportunity to use a desalination machine to create fresh, potable water for distribution during Exercises Alaska Shield and Vigilant Guard-Alaska 2014. Training on this specialized equipment will prove valuable and may alleviate logistical issues concerning water shortages during future natural disasters.

The recent exercise was the first time that the state public works department sent the machine out into a community with no roads. Members of the Cordova community were the first citizens to have the opportunity to make their own water. The desalination machine takes water from the harbor and runs it through a process to remove the salt, making it safe for drinking.

Members of Alpha Troop, 1st Battalion, 297th Cavalry (Reconnaissance and Surveillance Squadron) assisted operations at the general point of distribution. Soldiers transported supplies, gathered fresh water and distributed it to community members. The Soldiers were also very active in communicating with local residents, providing updates and offering safety information.

"As members of the Alaska National Guard, we have a commitment to our state to respond in the event of an emergency. The Soldiers have been very motivated to connect with the community; it has been a great experience to work alongside them," said 2nd Lt. Thomas Howard, platoon leader for Alpha Troop.

Barb Bunte, public health nurse and co-leader for the general point of distribution, took an opportunity to turn the exercise into a learning experience. She compiled Safety Kept in Place kits and they were handed out to community members as they collected fresh water. The kits included a thermal blanket, whistle, bandana, marker and safety information pamphlets.

"We're hoping the community takes advantage of this and teaches their children about safety. This exercise is also great because it tests our capabilities," said Bunte.

A general point of distribution disperses supplies such as water, food, tarps and blankets in the event of an emergency. A site was set up for community members to retrieve the fresh water. The point of distribution was made easily accessible in a drive-through manner. Each vehicle was given fresh water according to their needs and family size.

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"The point is for the community to learn how to handle the disaster before the disaster," said Bob Behrends, co-leader at the general point of distribution.

After the exercise, rural communities in the area have dedicated funds to have water samples that were desalinized tested for mercury, lead and arsenic. This will check the effectiveness of their procedures and efforts and allow them to adjust accordingly in the event of future natural disasters.

"We could not have responded nearly as well without the help of these Soldiers," said Bob Behrends, co-leader at the general point of distribution.

The National Guard is the nation's domestic first military responder, working with state, federal and interagency partners with a single set of objectives — saving lives, protecting communities and infrastructure, and supporting recovery efforts.

The Alaska Army National Guard responded to the community of Cordova in January 2012 in response to a snow storm that brought close to 30 inches of snow to the area.

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Photo cutlines

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Members of Alpha Troop, 1st Battalion, 297th Cavalry (Reconnaissance and Surveillance Squadron) assist the community of Cordova during the Exercises Alaska Shield and Vigilant Guard – Alaska 2014 in setting up a general point of distribution for fresh water. The purpose of the exercise was to test emergency response services in place around the state, to include the Alaska Army National Guard. Alaska National Guard Soldiers transported supplies, gathered fresh water and distributed it to community members. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Sara A. Marchus

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Staff Sgt. Garrett Kirby of Alpha Troop, 1st Battalion, 297th Cavalry (Reconnaissance and Surveillance Squadron) visits with a local Cordova resident at a general point of distribution during Exercises Alaska Shield and Vigilant Guard 2014. Here citizens were supplied with fresh water and safety information. Alaska National Guard members aided the Cordova community in the statewide combined exercise which simulated an earthquake and subsequent tsunami and was meant to test emergency response operations and preparedness. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Sara A. Marchus

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Sgt. Michael Luper and Staff Sgt. Garrett Kirby, members of Alpha Troop, 1st Battalion, 297th Cavalry (Reconnaissance and Surveillance Squadron) assist the community of Cordova during Exercises Alaska Shield and Vigilant Guard-Alaska 2014. A general point of distribution was set up for the locals to collect fresh water and safety information. The overall exercise simulated an earthquake and tsunami disaster and was meant to test emergency response operations and preparedness around the state of Alaska. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Sara A. Marchus